

## Charles Darwin's Anthropological Observations on Ceylonese

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### Summary

In his 1871 work, **The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex**. Darwin has made three anthropological observations pertaining to the nose, beard and polygamy in Ceylonese. He never visited Ceylon, and his observations were based on the works of Sir J. Emerson Tennent (1859) and Sir J. Lubbock (1865).

### Introduction

One hundred and twenty years have passed since Charles Darwin published his work, **The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex** in 1871 (1). The book is considered as the third component of his evolution quartet, which was initiated in 1859 by the publication of **On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle of Life**, and completed in 1872 with the work **The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals** (2).

Darwin's anthropological observations on Ceylonese are reviewed in this paper.

### Darwin's Observations

Darwin has commented on the two facial features (beard and nose) and one social custom of Ceylonese in his 1871 work.

On beard, Darwin noted, "with the natives of Ceylon they (beard) are often absent, as was noticed in ancient times by Diodorus" (1).

On the nose, Darwin's comments were as follows: "The nose is far from being too prominent, according to our ideas, in the natives of Ceylon; yet, the Chinese in the seventh century, accustomed to the flat features of Mongol races, were surprised at the prominent noses of the Cingalese, and Thsang described them as having, the beak of a bird, with the body of a man" (1).

Darwin's other comment was on the absence of polygamy among the Veddahs. He wrote, "polygamy, is almost universally followed by the leading men in every tribe. Nevertheless there are tribes, standing almost at the bottom of the scale,

which are strictly monogamous. This is the case with the Veddahs of Ceylon; they have a saying, according to Sir J. Lubbock, 'that death alone can separate husband and wife'. An intelligent Kandyan chief, of course a polygamist, 'was perfectly scandalised at the utter barbarism of living with only one wife, and never parting until separated by the death'. It was, he said, 'just like the Wanderoo monkey' " (1).

Regarding the fauna of Ceylon, Darwin made one observation on the elephant. He wrote "The elephant of Ceylon is considered by most naturalists as a distinct race but by some as a distinct species and here, 'not one in a hundred is found with tusks, the few that possess them being exclusively males' " (1).

### Discussion

In Darwin's 1859 classic, **On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection**, there appears only a passing reference to the plants of Ceylon. It stated, "On the Himalaya, and on the isolated mountain-ranges of the peninsula of India, on the heights of Ceylon, and on the volcanic cones of Java, many plants occur, either identically the same or representing each other, and at the same time representing plants of Europe, not found in the intervening hot lowlands"(1).

However, in the **Descent of Man**, Darwin had annotated Ceylonese people and fauna four times, despite the fact that he never visited the island. His sources of information which he cites in his annotations are two books which were published between 1859 and 1871. One was Emerson Tennent's **Ceylon**, published in 1859, the same year in which he published the **Origin of Species**. The second book was that of John Lubbock's **Pre-historic Times**, published in 1865. Darwin's annotation on the absence of polygamy was taken from Lubbock's work, while the other three (on the nose and beard of Ceylonese and on the elephants) were quoted from Tennent.

It is a pity that Darwin did not visit Ceylon to discover for himself whether the beard is often ab-

sent and whether the nose is prominent or less prominent among the natives of Ceylon. It has been reported that between 1842 and 1881 (the year he died), he was away from home only for about 2 000 days (2). This was mostly to attend the scientific meetings in London, 16 miles from his Down House, in Kent.

### References

1. Darwin C. *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), Modern Library edition, Random House, New York, undated, 824 870, 875, 896.
2. Kevles B. Darwin. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Macropedia, 15th ed, vol. **16**, 1990, 977-981.